



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Doctrinal Catechesis Session
Mary Birmingham

THE CHURCH



Seventh ecumenical council, Icon, 17th century.
Novodevichy Convent, Moscow, public domain



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven
Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil. Amen.



Note to the Catechist

There may be more material than you can use in a one-hour session. Select and arrange accordingly. Use questions and material that is best suited for your particular group.



Read the connecting statement

to draw the line between this week's liturgy and this chosen doctrinal theme.

This connecting statement is found in the *Breaking Open the Word* worksheet for this week.

Catholic Faith, Life & Creed Version 2.0

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Version 2.0 reflects all recent revisions in
the Roman Missal.

NIHIL OBSTAT
Rev. Steven Olds
Censor Liborum

IMPRIMATUR
† Most Rev. John Noonan
Bishop of Orlando

June 27, 2011

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Published cooperatively by
TeamRCIA.com and
PastoralPlanning.com.



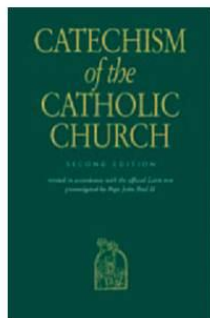
Sharing Human Experience

Catechist initiates a brief description of the Church, and then leads the conversation below:

- ▶ God is present to us through one very important sign: the *Church*.
- ▶ The Church tells us that the Church is like a sacrament. The Church brings the presence of Christ into our midst.
- ▶ When the Church is gathered, Christ is present.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of 2-4.

- ▶ Have you ever had an experience in which you experienced the presence of Christ? Please describe your experience.
- ▶ What does it mean to you when we say that Christ is present in the Church?



Sharing Catholic Doctrine

Drawn from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

Refer to articles 811-870.

What is the Church?

- ▶ The Church is known by many names that express the same truth: community, Church, people of God, assembly.
- ▶ The Church is a visible sign of God's presence in the world. The Church functions like a symbol. Symbols allow us to touch the unseen. They reflect an invisible truth or reality. God is experienced through tangible signs of his presence. The Church/people of God is a tangible sign of God's presence. The Church is a primary symbol of God.
- ▶ Human beings are social creatures. Human beings possess an intrinsic longing to belong to group.
- ▶ *Old Testament*. The ancient people of Israel understood themselves as the people of God, a sign and symbol of God's presence in their midst. Life outside the community was tenuous at best, treacherous at worst. The community became a sign of God's providential care. Survival outside the

community was always in question. The *community* was synonymous with life; exile was synonymous with death. The community provided safety and protection in a hostile world.

- ▶ “Since community was essential for life and since there was no life, food, shelter, or protection outside the community, perhaps the community was a sign of who God is, how God acts, and what it means to be God’s people. God functions like the community. God is provider, protector and the One who sustains life” (Word and Worship Workbook, Year C).
- ▶ *New Testament*. The Old Testament understanding of people of God as sign and symbol of God’s presence was taken a step further in the New Testament. The people of God were all those who embraced the revelation of Christ no matter their ancestral origin—Jew, Greek, or Gentile.
- ▶ The early Christian Church coined the term *ekklesia* (church) to mean the gathering of the citizens of the new heaven and new earth, the citizens of God’s kingdom in the last days.
- ▶ The New Testament included everyone in its designation of Church. All were welcome. No one would be excluded. The new Jerusalem would be a new political reality open to all who embraced the Christian way.
- ▶ One of the most extraordinary theologies posited by the Second Vatican Council was the restoration of ancient Israel’s concept of people of God as sign and symbol of God’s presence and providential care, the sustainer of life. *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* recaptured the biblical symbol of the Church as People of God, a profound, renewed understanding of the role and function of Church, seen as the bosom of God’s loving protection and intimate relationship with humankind.

What does the Church teach about itself?

- ▶ *Sharing the Light of Faith: The National Catechetical Directory*. “The Church is a mystery. It is a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God” (From Pope Paul VI’s opening allocution at the second session (September 19, 1963).
- ▶ The Church is a gift coming from the love of God, Christ’s redeeming action and the power of the Holy Spirit (National Catechetical Directory, #63).
- ▶ “As a divine reality inserted into human history, the Church is a kind of sacrament. Its unique relationship with Christ makes it both a sign and instrument of God’s unfathomable union with humanity and of the unity of human beings among themselves” (NCD #63).
- ▶ “...As a mystery, the Church cannot be totally understood or fully defined. Its nature and mission are best captured in scriptural parables and images, taken from ordinary life, which not only express truth about its nature but challenge the Church: for example, to become more a people of God, a better servant, more faithful and holy, more united around the teaching authority of the hierarchy” (NCD 63). Ultimately, the Church is a

community of believers.

- ▶ The Church is one body in Christ (Rom. 12:5).
- ▶ The Church is a servant. We continue the healing mission of Jesus in the world to serve God's people.
- ▶ The Church is a sign of the kingdom of God. The Church is committed to establishing Jesus' kingdom of peace and justice in the world.
- ▶ The Church is a pilgrim. The Church is on a journey, living in the reality of the kingdom now and yet to come. The Church remains faithful on this journey and is an example of steadfast discipleship.
- ▶ The Church is a priestly people, a people called to serve God's people.
- ▶ The Church is a prophetic people, a people baptized to proclaim God's word by word and deed.
- ▶ The Church is a royal people, a people baptized to lead people to Christ and Christian discipleship.



Sharing Faith

Exercise

Catechist invites participants to engage in the following exercise. Break into groups of four. Each group is given a piece of newsprint. Divide the paper into three:

- ✓ first section write: Servant
- ✓ second section write: Kingdom of God
- ✓ third section write: Pilgrim

Invite the groups to write the way in which they have experienced the Church as servant, the Church as a sign of the kingdom of God, and the Church as a pilgrim Church. Invite participants to share their discussions with the wider group.

History

- ▶ The Church has its roots in the movement founded by Jesus. He did not formally “found” the Church, such as giving it a structure and a constitution, but he did establish its foundations. Jesus gave it the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist that would provide the means for its growth and nurturing. There are no new members if they are not baptized into the Church.
- ▶ Jesus gathered the Twelve, symbolizing the transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament. The Twelve Apostles symbolically represent the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The Twelve Apostles are the new leaders of the Church in the newly established messianic age, the new Israel.
- ▶ As the Church grew and developed it established certain beliefs that were considered central to Christian faith. Those who were about to be baptized were instructed in these articles of belief.
- ▶ The Apostles Creed sets forth the central tenets of faith for the first Christian community. It is one of the oldest creeds.
- ▶ The early Church was comprised of small communities that gathered in people’s houses. It grew and developed due to the work of the apostles who went out as missionaries, but most especially because of the missionary efforts of St. Paul who took Christianity to the Gentile world.
- ▶ Paul wrote letters to the new communities. He encouraged, them, challenged them, taught them, and chastised them, when they needed chastising.
- ▶ St. Paul referred to *ekklesia* usually as a word for the local Church, but in his letter to the Ephesians and Colossians it was a reference to the universal Church.
- ▶ By the end of the first century, the laying on of hands became a liturgical sign for being invested into office.
- ▶ Evidence of the presider at Eucharist being associated with Church leadership is found in a source by Ignatius of Antioch, circa 110.
- ▶ Church structures had become well enough organized that by early in the second century communities would be known as the Catholic Church. The structure of bishop, surrounded by priests, then deacons was observed also circa 110 in Antioch and throughout the Church by the second century.
- ▶ As the Church developed over time, it organized its rituals and structure, thus creating an institution that would survive the spread of Catholicism throughout the Greco-Roman world.
- ▶ By the third century, the small communities of the early Church had grown to such an extent that they had become known as the “Great Church” that extended all the way from Africa to Spain with Rome as the epicenter.
- ▶ During the Dark Ages, otherwise known as the early Middle Ages, the Roman Empire had collapsed. The imperial structure of the Church fell into disarray. The monastic movement was responsible for sustaining the

Catholic Church during this time. The monasteries were centers of learning and spiritual formation for the people.

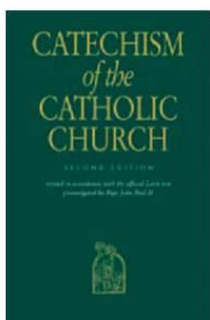
- ▶ Many calls for the reform of the Church occurred in the Middle Ages. Some abuses had crept into the Church; reform was needed. There was a lack of communication and honest dialogue on the part of everyone.
- ▶ By the 16th century, reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other Reformers sought to carry out what they believed was a return to the Church that Christ founded. They believed that the Church had deviated from Scripture. Such reformers were known as Protestants. Most reformers broke away from the Catholic Church to form their own churches. Martin Luther is the founder of the Lutheran Church, John Wesley is the founder of the Methodist Church, and John Knox is the founder of the Presbyterian Church.
- ▶ One important issue during that time centered on the issue of whether a person is justified (saved) by faith or by works. The Protestant position was that a person is justified by faith alone. The Catholic Church insisted that a person is justified by faith and action. A person's faith leads to just action. Today this argument has been reconciled between Lutherans and Catholics: both would affirm that we are saved by faith, but because of that faith our loving response leads to right action.
- ▶ In response to the Protestant reformation, the Church sought to reform itself by strenuously correcting abuses and by carefully and meticulously setting forth and codifying what it believes, its theology. The Church did not change much over the next 400 years.
- ▶ The primacy and infallibility of the papacy (in matters of faith and morals) was established at the First Vatican Council in 1870.
- ▶ In the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council sought to bring new life into the Church. Pope John XXIII called for a council that would respond to the needs of the modern world and renew the Church. We are living in the shadows of this modern renewal.



Sharing Faith

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question in the wider group.

- ▶ When one considers the overall panoramic view of the Church's history, what does it teach us about the Church?
- ▶ Why do you suppose the Church is still a strong body of believers today as it was when it was established?
- ▶ What does that teach us about the Church?



Sharing Catholic Doctrine

Drawn from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

What does the *Catechism* teach about the Church?

- ▶ The Church is a community of the faithful who work together to share the gospel and become closer to God (830-831).
- ▶ The Church is the “holy people of God” (823).
- ▶ The Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic (811-813).

The Marks of the Church

From the very beginning, the Church has demonstrated four special characteristics. These marks identify and describe the Church.

1. The Church is one, just as there is one God in three persons of the Trinity.
 - a. That is why the Church says there is only one Church, the Church of Jesus Christ. All other churches are part of this one Church founded by Christ; they all subsist in this Church.
2. The Church is holy because it is formed and founded in Christ and the Holy Spirit.
 - a. The Church models its life on the life of Christ. Thus, it strives to live and teach as Jesus lived and taught.
3. The Church is catholic, which means it is universal.
 - a. God offers God’s grace through the Church to all people.
 - b. All validly baptized people are considered members of the Church. Some may not be in full communion, but a validly baptized person is a member of the Church.
 - c. All churches subsist within the Catholic Church. In other words, all churches are part of the Catholic Church.
4. The Church is apostolic.
 - a. The Church is built on the foundation of the Apostles; thus, it does what the Apostles did. The Apostles went out and shared the Good News. They preached Good News to the poor and oppressed.



Sharing Faith

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in the wider group.

- ▶ What does it mean to you when we say the Church is one?
- ▶ What does it mean to you when we say the Church is holy?
- ▶ What does it mean to you when we say the Church is catholic?
- ▶ What does it mean to you when we say the Church is apostolic?

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question. Catechist shares experience from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ If that is what the Church is, then, since you are a member or are preparing to become a member, what are the implications for you and the way you live your Christian life?

The Mission of the Church

- ▶ The Church's mission is to be a witness to and proclaim the reign of God on earth.
- ▶ The Church continues the work of Jesus on earth.
- ▶ St Theresa of Avila said: "Christ has no body now on earth but ours."
- ▶ The Church is the Body of Christ and thus continues his saving mission.
- ▶ All Christians—clergy, laity, and religious—do this work.

The Precepts of the Church

The Church has set forth commandments similar to the Ten Commandments that every Catholic is asked to follow in response to God's love for them.

1. Take part in Mass on Sunday and Holy Days set forth by the Church.
2. Celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation at least once a year if there is serious sin.
3. Receive Holy Communion at least once a year during Easter time. (We are nourished at the table each week; we can do no less than partake every time we come to the table. The Church is suggesting a minimum here; at the very least one must partake at least once a year. The truth is that we should all come to the Eucharistic table every time we gather unless serious sin prevents us from doing so.)
4. Fast and/or abstain on days of fast and abstinence, which include especially days of penance such as Ash Wednesday and Fridays during Lent.
5. Give your gift of time, gifts, money to support the Church and its work of spreading the good news.



Mystagogy & your decision for change

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in dyads.

- ▶ Considering all we have said about the Church, what teachings are the most challenging?
- ▶ What attracts you the most?
- ▶ What is it about the Catholic Church that most helps you be a good disciple of Jesus?

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question with one other person.

- ▶ Can you relate what we have shared today in the liturgy, in our breaking open session and in our session on Church teaching to some experience in your life?
- ▶ How does this teaching concretely have anything to do with your life?

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question in the wider group.

- ▶ How do today's liturgy and our sharing on the Church challenge you to be a better disciple?
- ▶ How are you called to concretely respond?



Community Connections

Liturgy, Scripture and doctrine challenges us to transform our lives so that we can go out and help transform the world. Discuss what, if any, activity/outreach is taking place in the parish this week that flows from the Church's teaching regarding itself.

Journal

Spend time this week writing or thinking about any of the questions above.



Closing Prayer

Option 1: If this is a catechumenal session, end the session with Intercessions, Doxology (“Glory be to the Father...”), a minor rite—a blessing or minor exorcism, RCIA # 90-97.

Option 2: If this is not a catechumenal setting, end with one or both of the Opening Prayers for the Feast of St. John Lateran in the Sacramentary. Include Intercessions and the Lord’s Prayer.

Option 3: Use the prayer given below.

Apostles’ Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified,
died,
and was buried.
He descended into hell;
the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father;
from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen.

Appendix

#1. I am particularly touched by the holiness of the Church. I have experienced its power first-hand. The Church is always there to provide the ministry of Jesus to its members. Members of my choir were particularly compassionate about the illness of one of my family members. They went to the pastor and asked that we celebrate the sacrament of anointing of the sick for this ill family member who could not be present.

We all gathered and together and celebrated the sacrament. I thought the sacrament was for my sick family member. However, when hands were laid upon me in proxy for him, I realized that the ministry of the Church was for me.

The very holiness of Christ reached into my soul and healed me in the midst of a very sorrow-filled illness. The holiness of the Church helps us touch the ministry of Jesus in our everyday lives today. It is a true sign of Christ's ongoing presence and ministry in our lives.

Handout on the Church

What is the Church?

- ▶ The Church is known by many names that express the same truth: community, Church, people of God, assembly.
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